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# Sing Sing Must Go [Bulletin Number Four, Prison Association of New York]

O. F. Lewis

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# SING SING MUST GO!

BULLETIN NUMBER FOUR

PRISON ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK, 135 EAST 15TH STREET.

NEW YORK

## GREAT MEADOW'S HONOR PRISON

[An article by O. F. Lewis, General Secretary of the Prison Association of New York, reprinted from the Boston (Mass.) Transcript of November 19, 1913, describing the latest State prison of New York.]

I have just come back to New York City from a day and a night at Great Meadow Prison, with my friends the four Prussian prison commissioners who for some five weeks have been giving to our American correctional institutions the closest kind of an inspection. That day and that night at Great Meadow were the most unique experiences I have had in a number of years of daily concern with prison matters, as general secretary of the Prison Association of New York. If they were startling to me, what must they have been to my German colleagues, whose prisons are instruments of stern rectification of crimes committed? As one of the German commissioners said to me: "When some of my German colleagues in Berlin get my letters about the last twenty-four hours here at Great Meadow, they on't believe me. And I am afraid that even my wife will think I'm a little queer!"

And so it occurred to me, up there, that when I came back to New York the readers of the Transcript, whom some years ago I had often the pleasure of talking with, would like a picture of what took place last week in the foot hills of the Adirondacks, just south of the head of Lake Champlain, where New York has built so far just a cell-block and a small brick building, and has had to put into the cell-block some six hundred State prisoners, because the other prisons became so crowded that it was a scandal to pile the boys in any closer. So the State joined the ends of the smaller building to the side walls of the bigger building, making a hollow square, and the stockade is some eight feet high, and about two hundred feet across. That is all the wall there is at Great Meadow Prison for six hundred prisoners, most of whom go in and out of the gate during the day a number of times, and not a few of them wander



GREAT MEADOW PRISON, UNDER CONSTRUCTION

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SATURDAY'S BASE BALL AUDIENCE OF PRISONERS  
GREAT MEADOW PRISON

to their work entirely without guards.

### Thinking Back

Now first of all, in order to obtain something of a perspective, think back a few years in Massachusetts or any other Eastern State. What was the attitude toward the convict? He was an object of aversion and fear. In my boyhood, in Boston, every convict was by reputation a Jesse Pome-roy. And today, ask yourself how many prisoners roam outside of the Charlestown State Prison wall's un- caught. Yet many of the prisoners at Great Meadow are free almost as the air they breathe. Only they mustn't run away; and they don't. Why not, I'll say shortly.

In Germany things are even stricter than in our older prisons. There is separate confinement for every prisoner, for some months; that is, he doesn't come in contact with any other prisoner. Formerly all prisoners wore cloth masks; now they don't. But if a prisoner is long enough in prison he gets into a shop where he can work with others, but without talking. Finally, if he has been in prison a very long time, years in fact, he may be sent out upon the desolate moors, or into the river valleys, to work at reclamation of land or the digging of canals. But strict discipline and the minimum of contact with one's fellow is a cardinal

principle. And furthermore, the German prison authorities are strongly convinced that in most respects this is the best way to keep prisoners from contaminating and demoralizing each other. Suffice it to say, the prison life of a German prison is extremely rigorous.

What did they find at Great Meadow Prison? The best answer will be the running story of the day and evening. With the preliminary remark, however, that our most advanced theory of the treatment of the State prisoner today provides that so far as possible the walls of the prison shall be razed, or not built at all, and that the "honor system" by which the prisoner is trusted to his own sense of decency, shall be predominant. And so a former Massachusetts man, Colonel Joseph F. Scott, formerly superintendent of the Concord Reformatory, and in 1911 superintendent of prisons in New York State, called to his newest State prison a man named Homer, who was just a plain business man and not a penologist, and told him to run the unvalled prison the best way he could. At the time Mr. Homer arrived at Great Meadow (which figures on the map of New York State as Comstock), there were several hundred raging human hyenas in the cells, for the former warden had been too frightened to let them out into the enclosure, for fear of a general jail delivery. The

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## SING SING MUST GO!

way Warden Homer tamed them is another story, but the facts of the day and evening when the German commissioners were at Great Meadow will tell you some of the tricks that the warden has taught the prisoners.

### The Prison Band—Welcome

When the train rolled in at 11 A. M. on the Delaware & Hudson, it was a perfect fall morning. Comstock is a hamlet with perhaps a half-dozen houses. The prison is a half-mile up the road. The train had hardly stopped in this hill village before, from a good-sized band, arose the martial "Wacht am Rhein." It was fine to see the celerity with which the commissioners from the Fatherland hastened to jump from the platform, drop their hand luggage and doff their hats as the thirty-odd boys in light blue, all prisoners, played the successive stanzas of the German national song. And then, as the music passed into one verse of the "Star Spangled Banner," and the group of perhaps fifty at the station and on the hill stood bareheaded, the emotion of the Americans in the party was very real indeed.

So we arrived. Bustled into an automobile, and others of the party into carriages, we marched, with the band preceding, to the warden's house, an old but stately stone building at the top of the little hill. Here we gossiped a half-hour with the warden, his

wife and daughter, and the superintendent of prisons from Albany. Meanwhile the band boys played on, the morning was crisp, the prisoners working along the road had returned to their macadamizing, the lifer had gone back to the henyard to his precious White Orpingtons, and we had a moment in which to look around.

The warden is a great man in size and in heart. He never speaks without a smile, and if you can get him to talk for three minutes about anything except his prison and his "boys," you win. Such a wrapped-up man in his subject—the boys—I have never met. Then there is his energetic little wife, who is often, I am sure, the power behind the throne, and his sensible daughter, just home from the academy, and his house servants. The important thing about the house servants is that they are all prisoners. There's a butler, a cook, a kitchen boy, a house boy, a driver, and the like. And the warden's family is just as safe as safe can be. The boys seem to adore the members of the family. The warden has his "club," as he calls it, every evening, out in the kitchen, after the chores are all over. The club is composed of his house boys and himself. As one of them said to me, "Can you beat it?"

### Talking It Over with Convicts

"Now," said Warden Homer, "I want the commissioners to go up to the prison and talk with the boys; there'll



TWO TYPICAL CELLS AT SING SING

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PRISONERS ON THE FARM, GREAT MEADOW

be about a half hour till dinner time. Let them ask anything they want to." And the commissioners did. The moment the German delegates came within the enclosure, where some hundred prisoners were freely wandering up and down, some playing handball, some other games, they were surrounded by groups of inquisitive but exceedingly respectful men in gray. For the State prisoners in New York State wear no stripes. In no other prison have I seen visitors so abandoned to the prisoners. Frequently, in the interstices of the crowd encompassing me, I could see the other groups, but the commissioners in the centre were lost to view. And only a stray guard or two was in sight.

Many were the questions and communications in those groups. There were German prisoners enough to keep all the groups busy. For frankness commend me to the prisoner who has cause for complaint. There were many last Wednesday, but not about Great Meadow. The complaints were mainly, and strongly, about certain phases of our criminal procedure, and our penal code, resulting in strong grievances among the boys. But that's not a story for this article. As I thought again of the separate cells, the absence of such promiscuous comingling of prisoners in the Fatherland, and the long years with a definite sentence, instead of the hopeful uncertainty of the indeterminate sen-

tence, the contrast in the Great Meadow yard between American and German prison methods became even more striking.

#### A Human Experiment Station

But there was much more to come. The Great Meadow prison is a big human experiment station. It has raised a volley of the most important and fundamental questions as to what prisons ought to be and do, and it is in the middle of answering them. Our German friends have come to us just as we have the answer, so to speak, half-spoken. Is this great freedom, this surprising opportunity for the development of individuality in the prisoner, going to succeed? If it is right, the old system of the high walls, the forbidding cells, the stripes and the lockstep is horribly wrong. But if, finally, the Great Meadow system, with its hundreds of inmates of an afternoon scattered all over a thousand acres, and with no rifles in the hands of the guards, fails through a succession of jail deliveries, then what? What shall we try next?

This prison system in process, "im werden," as the Germans phrased it, was of course intensely interesting to them, as being far in advance of anything that could be attempted or even dared in Germany. And so, as in the afternoon they motored over the farm, the ramifications of the experiment



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grew upon them. Here was the lifer with his hens; there the little Italian, who in the boldest way had held up a bank messenger in New York, nursing his pigs along so anxiously; here the sheep boy, with his herds on the hills, he himself being in for forgery, or assault, or perhaps manslaughter. Wherever one turns, one finds the boys who on the outside were the antisocial elements of society here contributing to the products of the State, and with good will.

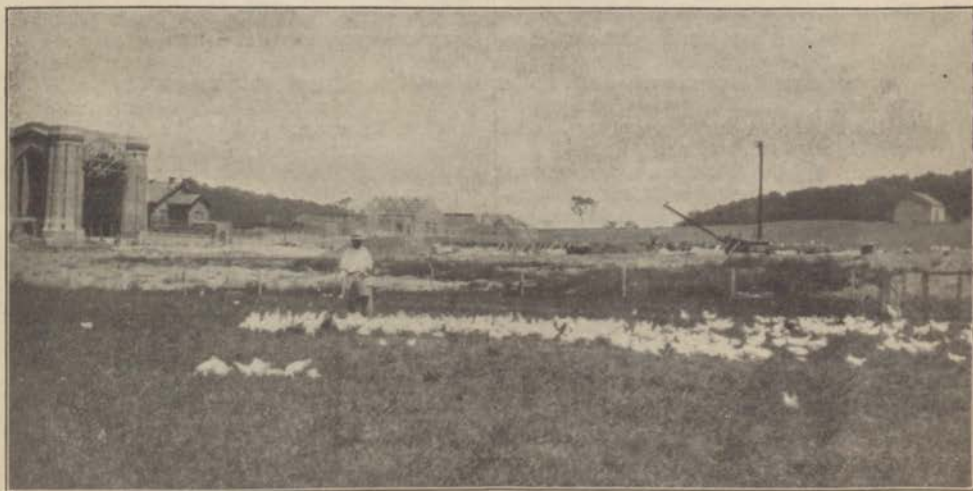
It was explained to the German delegates that these six hundred were picked men, and that Great Meadow Prison was regarded in the other State prisons as a reward for good behavior. They were told that generally the boys that came up to Great Meadow had a year or perhaps two, more to serve before being eligible for parole, and that the boys guarded jealously their conduct, because they all knew that if things went very wrong all the present rare privileges might be cut off, and Great Meadow go back to the old-style institution. And, to show how successful the results had been, the warden said that in over a year there had been but three escapes, and those were pretty easily explained.

### Entertainments—Surprises

I asked one of my German colleagues, toward the end of the afternoon, what he thought about it all. "Intense-

ly interesting," he answered. "You see, after a while you come to lose the feeling that you are having to do with a prison. Every one of these amazing features seems to fit in with entire naturalness into the scheme." And that is literally so. Wander over the farm, and you stop to chat with the workers about as you do with the farm hands of the private farm. Go down to the cow barn, and they're milking some fifty cows by dim light. You talk with them about the stock, and they know their jobs. You see them close up the barns and take their lanterns and go up unguarded to the prison cell-block, a half-mile away, in the moonlit night. The last thing at night that you hear, if you are stopping at the warden's house, is the locking up of the house by a house-boy, who is a prisoner. I went out about seven, the second morning we were at the farm, into the carriage barn, and, finding three "boys" drawn up around the stove, plunged with them into a discussion of the parole laws of the State. Later in the morning I strolled back and forth beside the warden's house, with the prisoner-leader of the string-orchestra, and with this exceptionally intelligent man talked on the underlying factors in the success of the prison in general.

But to get back to our story. The night had come on, and we came back to the warden's to dinner. Should I tell of the abundant hospitality of



THE "LONG TERMER" AND HIS CHICKENS, GREAT MEADOW

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A PRISONER AND HIS PETS, GREAT MEADOW

the occasion, it would seem fulsome. But I can tell of two surprises during the dinner. In the adjoining room the "boys" contributed a mandolin club of some ten instruments. In another adjoining room a young Hungarian Jew sang a half-dozen times with a voice that, though untrained, was exceptionally good. At our plates were menus of the dinner, hand-drawn in delicate patterns by a prisoner whose acquaintance with Wall Street and certain illegal uses of pen and ink had been considerable.

#### Cheers for the Warden

But the evening furnished the culminating episode of the day. The warden announced that a surprise was in store for the guests. So, through the night, we motored or were driven up to the cellblock, which with its long, high, brightly lighted windows stood out on the hill as a veritable thing of beauty. As we came into the cellblock, we saw the corridor, for many hundred feet, lighted by incandescent bulbs. On the right hand side of the corridor were the giant windows and the long, long wall of the building; on the other side were four long galleries, or tiers, rising into the less lighted upper portion of the cell hall. And from the railings of the tiers, packed like the traditional sardines, looked down at us some six hundred prisoners, all liberated from their cells, all enthusiastically applauding the foreign guests as they entered. Rarely has

anyone ever seen an odder, or a more moving sight, than those hundreds of heads, lighted and shaded by the somewhat uncertain light of the cellblock—all human brothers, in captivity.

We were escorted to our seats in the front row, with Mrs. Homer and her daughter, and another guest. The warden, for some months seriously under the weather, but gaining strength, had decided not to come up in the cold night air. The string-orchestra, composed of prisoners, and trained entirely by prisoners, gave manfully its first number, an overture from some German operetta. Then, suddenly, a tumultuous applauding from the galleries, and shouts of welcome. For down the long corridor, from the central entrance of the cellblock, came slowly the warden, resting on his cane. Salvo after salvo of cheers met him, and also the old question as to "What's the matter with the warden?" etc. I have been inspecting prisons for years, but never have I seen a similar spontaneous greeting of prisoners and keeper. For the boys knew that the warden simply couldn't stay away.

The programme was in two parts, a string-orchestra concert, followed by the band. As the numbers were played, the boys gave vociferous applause, and once required an encore. And then, between the parts of the programme came the biggest surprise of all. For the chairs were cleared away and a mat was brought in, and in a moment two young Italians in bath



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robes slipped silently in and were introduced as contestants in a wrestling match that was to settle the many days' debates that had been setting the prison by the ears as to which could throw the other. And they went at it. The prisoners in the galleries were in great excitement. The officials were all prisoners. The only place in which guards could be found was on the outskirts of the groups on the floor and now and then in the galleries. One of the contestants, the smaller, had a position in the warden's house, and he was, because of his good physical condition, picked to win. But the bigger fellow, though parading vast accumulations of flesh, threw the little fellow in about ten minutes of struggle. And then the band played on.

Well—when you catch your breath, and say to yourself that this is a part of prison life in Great Meadow today, you wonder if the whole theory of imprisonment is not crumbling; if the boys inside don't have it a good deal better than those on the outside. This is not the time or the place, unfortunately, to discuss at length the theories of imprisonment and the best protection of society. Suffice it to say, that none of the boys at Great Meadow would willingly stay, could they have their liberty. Furthermore, I have touched only certain "high spots," so to speak, in my description. The daily routine is a different matter. While there is liberty in abundance, as compared with the old-line prisons, such liberty is conditional upon the prisoner doing cheerfully and well the tasks of daily prison life that are assigned to him to do.

### An Exchange of Smoker's Courtesies

All through the day there were little touches of kindness and attention for the guests of the prison, the Germans, that showed the undercurrent of solicitude of the finer-feeling prisoners for the men who had come from across the seas to learn what Great Meadow had to teach. One of the most curious touches occurred at the band concert. Smoking was allowed in the cellblock, and the chairman of the German commission was a good smoker. At length he ran out of matches, and quietly was searching his pockets for a stray box, when suddenly down from above dropped a box of matches, and after them came the "glad hand,"

so to speak, waved by a prisoner who had seen the commissioner's plight. With intense pleasure the commissioner told of the episode later in the evening.

Just before the close, I had walked to the back of the corridor, to chat with a guard. As I came back, what did I find? These staid Germans had stopped the concert, and were out in the open space before the chairs, engaged in attempting to throw cigars up to the boys on the second tier! Oh, shades of the days when men were flogged and beaten; when the water cure and the cuffing-up were in vogue; when the prisoners at Sing Sing threw themselves from windows to escape the torturing grind of contract labor, or thrust their feet into molten metal to gain the rest that a hospital bed would give! It's a long way to Great Meadow, but it has at last been travelled.

### Faith and Fact

And then we stopped over night, as the guests of Warden Homer and his wife. The next morning brought a heavy white frost over the thousand acres, but the prisoners were out early at their chores like the farm hands of large estates. The morning brought no new "surprises," as the commissioners had come to call the spectacular developments at the prison, but only the confirmation of the impressions of the day before. Along toward eleven o'clock the band marched down once more from the prison, the carriages drove up, we jumped in, and were conveyed back to the railroad station. As the train pulled in the national melodies of Germany and America were again lustily played, some cheers were given, there was general waving of hands, and Great Meadow was behind us.

As we caught a last look across the canal valley, up to the warden's house, we saw standing on the high banking the daughter of the warden, her girl friend, a keeper, and one of the prisoners, probably the leader of the string orchestra. They all were waving a good-by. That quick vision was a key-note of the Great Meadow gospel of faith. There together stood several formerly irreconcilable elements, in matters of prison treatment. That young unprotected woman, the keeper, the prisoner. They tell me at Great Meadow that there are still families who pull down their shades when they



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see the prisoners going by. But not all families act thus. I heard recently of a mother who gladly gave her little baby boy into the kind hands of some prisoners who were taking a motor-truck load of freight up from the station to the prison. All kinds of people make up a world—and a prison. When you ask how many men you can trust in a prison, it is fair to ask how many of the same number of persons you could trust on the outside.

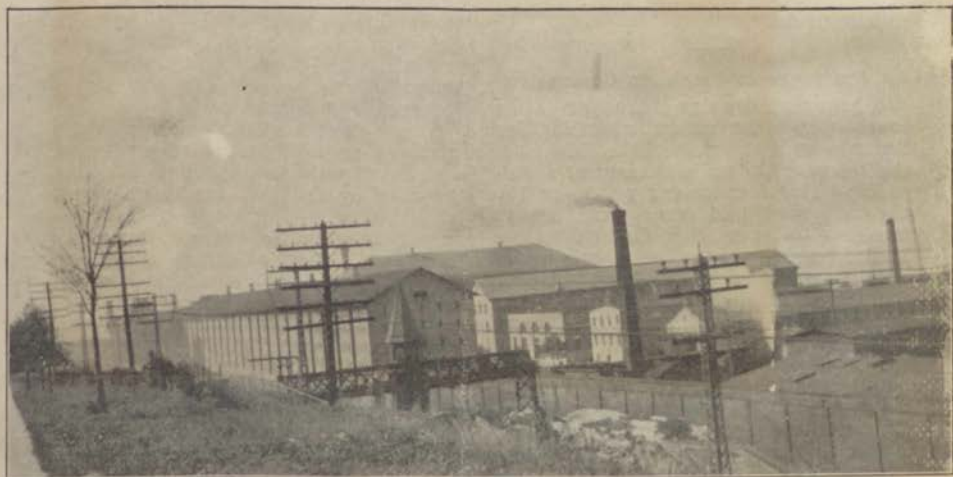
### Significances—and Goodby

Well, you ask what the Germans thought of it all? The commissioners are following the clam's example, and say little. Ultimately there will appear in German official circles a comprehensive report about our bold experiments, as well as about our failures, conspicuous among which are our county and local jails. But about Great Meadow we Americans can have at present no lengthy criticism from our German colleagues. As one of the group said, cryptically, "You have many things here that for you are good and for us bad; and the other way round too."

But the big question, after all is, not what Germans or Americans may think about it all, but what it is really doing for the prime purpose of imprisonment, the protection of society? And even there it is too early to give a definite answer. Certain facts are sure. Prisoners contrast Sing Sing and Great Meadow as differing as widely as the regions below from the

regions above. Sure it is that at Great Meadow there is health, and work, and the feeling in the hearts of the prisoners that they are getting a square deal. Prison vices are remarkably reduced; honor and respect are developed, and relative joy in the day's work is found. The prisoners chafe for the day of liberty or parole, and so they should, for prison ought never to become a haven of contentment and rest. But, if I were to name one factor in prison administration that is above all others essential to the final welfare of the State, which embraces both the prisoner and the outside public, I would say that the prisoner, in court and in prison, must feel that justice has been done him.

If our courts, by their defective or unjust procedure, send anti-social, sullen men and women to prison, so much the worse for the State. If our prisons make their inmates inveigh justly against the iniquity of the State in housing or guarding or feeding them, so much the worse for the State. The great problem facing the administration of criminal law and of correctional institutions today is exactly the question of meeting out justice to all; not the justice that is necessarily found in the penal code, for that may prove most unjust at times, but the great justice based on the best conceptions of human brotherhood, which in prison develops often to a surprising extent, and which perhaps may be largely the key to the solution of the problem of the reduction of crime.



SING SING PRISON